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## **Shortgrass Country**

**by Monte Noelke**

At the last calf sale in San Angelo, 1000 head more cattle showed up than were expected. Seating space and standing room by noon we were filled to capacity. Around the ring, both buyers and sellers showed as bad cases of nerves as the calves experiencing their first public appearances.

Among the few familiar faces were graybeards who'd been around the hollow horn game for a long time as herders or purchasers. The best surprise was picking out one of the Boss's cronies making his way through the corridor. He looked as fresh as he did way back in the days of the old downtown hotels.

Before I could catch his eye, he plopped down between a retired sheep buyer and a tired looking cow herder. The boss always said old so-and-so had a blind side when I came to social status. The Boss was an expert on the subject. He'd shot dice in about every horse stall from the Florida tracks to way up in New Mexico. He'd worn out a couple of tuxedos dancing at fancy polo affairs and knew big and little shots from one end of the country to the other. I'd have taken his word on the different social scales over Miss Amy Vanderbilt's, and give her a 10-point handicap.

Members of the cattle associations kept breaking my signals, handing out ribbons to the big show-offs who'd entered prize loads of calves. The sheep buyer relit his dead cigar and thus further separated the Boss's old pal from view in a haze of toxic fumes.

At the end of the show awards, a delinquent school kid was sent up to give me a yellow ribbon colored like a gooseneck squash. Scribbled on the back was the word "pen" and what might of been the abbreviation of steers. When I told the kid to go wash his hands and blow his nose the old devil I'd been watching recognized by voice. But just as the Boss predicted years ago, he stayed down there with the stogie-smoking woolie buyer and showed not the least concern for my family name.

Cigar smoke began to send the weaker participants outdoors to the flies and hot sun on the catwalk. The last prize I'd won as demeaning as this was a package of single-edge razor blade at the Christmas party in the fifth grade. The Boss was a good judge of character. He wasn't a bad hand at working cattle, either.